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Editorial: Italian Cultural Studies. Being on the side of the future

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Abstract

This is the editorial for the *Italian Cultural Studies* guest edited issue of *JOMEK Journal*, published in November 2015. It outlines the conditions of cultural crisis as well as of social and political discontent in Italy during the last years of Silvio Berlusconi's government, highlighting the demand for a commitment to improved ethical and democratic standards in contemporary Italy. This editorial also suggests a possible way to pursue such an ethico-political commitment, assigning particular importance to public pedagogy and cultural politics.

Contributor Note

Floriana Bernardi received a PhD in Theory of Language and Sign Sciences at the University of Bari Aldo Moro, Italy (2012). She is currently a Visiting Researcher in the School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies at Cardiff University (UK), where she is developing a monograph on Roberto Saviano. Some of her latest publications include 'Roberto Saviano: a Media Phenomenon to Recount the South', in G. Parati (ed.) *New Perspectives on Italian Cultural Studies. Volume 2: The Arts and History*, (Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012); 'Gazes, Targets, (En)Visions: Reading Fatima Mernissi through Rey Chow' in *Social Semiotics* (Routledge, 2010); and 'Open Fields. (Social) Networks, Revolutions and "New Real-life Cyborgs"' in *JOMEK Journal, Reconnecting Political Disconnection* (June 2012). She has edited and translated a collection of essays by Paul Bowman entitled *Studi culturali: Teoria, Intervento, Cultura Pop* (Progedit, 2011).

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Being on the Side of the Future

Now, perhaps more than ever, Italy needs cultural studies.

Since the beginning of this century, Italy has seen numerous publications within the arena of cultural studies. As the editors of 'Cultural Studies in Italy (2000-2010): State of the Art. A Reasoned Bibliographic Catalogue',¹ state, the decision to organize the selected publications around categories – theories and methods, postcolonial, performance, gender, subaltern, new media and translation studies – aimed at outlining the different debates animated by cultural studies scholars in Italy today. Notwithstanding ongoing academic resistance and skepticism in the face of interdisciplinarity and alterdisciplinarity, cultural studies scholars keep on trying to disturb and disrupt the ivory towers of academic (and non-academic) discourses, both from within the academy itself and, for those struggling to be heard as independent researchers, or as seriously underpaid and overworked adjunct lecturers – from the liminality of their utterance positions.

In 2012, when the editorial project of this guest-edited issue was still in its very embryonic stage, Italy was coming to grips with the end of an era, *Berlusconismo*, which has indisputably cast a long shadow over the present and future of the country. Among the whistles and celebrations of his opponents in Quirinale Square and other streets in Rome, Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi resigned at 9.42 pm on 12th November 2011 and left a country ravaged by debts, by near economic default and,

even more importantly, by a deep cultural and political crisis. Italy was then in complete decline – as depicted in the independent documentary film, *Girlfriend in a coma* (2012), directed by Annalisa Piras and Bill Emmott. Italian democracy as a whole was being wrecked by corruption, organized crime, media domination, servile journalism, racist attitudes even within institutions, questionable representations of women in the media, acute gender and class divide, the emigration of graduate students towards foreign countries due to the high unemployment rate, corruption and perceived immorality in the management of public affairs and the wholesale undermining of institutions. This state of affairs resulted in a widespread cultural exhaustion, from which, however, the desire for change, rebirth and cultural revolution began to spring from more and more quarters. Perhaps predictably, social media networks were highly significant in mobilising this desire for change across society, as I will try to show.

An exemplary case involves the writer Roberto Saviano and the media phenomenon that grew around his public personality. In 2006, after the publication of his work *Gomorra*, the writer was assigned police protection because of the death threats he received by Camorra, one of the most dangerous Italian networks of organized crime. In response to this, huge numbers of people rallied to his support, first on websites and social networks, and subsequently filled up public streets and squares in defense of Saviano; hailed as the man who had finally reawakened in the Italian populace a sense both of conscience and self-consciousness. Saviano was widely seen to have shifted the public debate on issues like ethical and political commitment and the

¹ My translation of the Italian title: 'Consuntivo sugli studi culturali in Italia (2000-2010). Repertorio bibliografico ragionato'.

courage of *denuncia*; not to mention the unmasking of pervasive and underhand media strategies such as the so-called *macchina del fango*, used to delegitimize political rivals or 'problem' journalists. Saviano was also seen as re-visioning the hope for change in Italy and its inhabitants, as well as renewed faith in the potency of words and literature. By means of his variegated experimentations and trans-media disseminations, encompassing literature, journalism, television, internet, radio, music, cinema, and theatre, Roberto Saviano had begun to influence and disrupt the collective imaginary of Berlusconi Italy. By raising questions, arousing debates, and provoking reactions, he demonstrated that culture was strongly in need of interpretation, and is a constant battlefield where, thanks to literature and the different forms of cultural industry, it was *still* possible to build single and collective identities able to re-articulate agency, counter-power and counter-hegemonic practices.

Despite being the object of sometimes very harsh criticism – not least the critique of being a pop star of culture subordinate to the mores of consumer society and editorial marketing (particularly Mondadori, being the publishing house owned by the Berlusconi family), and of being the emblematic result of the kind of subcultural hegemony distinguishing Berlusconi Italy (see Dal Lago: 2010; Trocino: 2011) – Roberto Saviano has always defended his media strategy. For him, this approach was useful not only to protect his life, deflecting media attention onto the complex issues he was unmasking, but it also served the purpose of creating a new level of citizen awareness; achieved through education, collective participation and civil and political engagement. For Saviano, only

by promoting these values could a new cultural, political and economic paradigm emerge in Italy.

As the years passed, further protests gained media attention: some of them were strictly political, and precisely anti-Berlusconi; others were political and cultural in a broader sense. I will mention some of them briefly: September 8th 2007 in Bologna was the so called *Vaffanculo Day* (*V-Day*, 'Fuck off Day'), organized to carry out a citizens' petition about the members of Parliament's election criteria. The *V-Day* organizer was Beppe Grillo, comedian and spokesperson for the *Five Star Movement* (5SM), founded in 2009. Conceived as an anti-Berlusconi protest organization, the Five Star Movement soon became an anti-establishment web-based movement (with populist connotations). The movement went on to achieve electoral success with more than 25 per cent of votes in the 2013 general election, thus becoming the most voted-for party. It advocated radical change in Italian politics – particularly the end of the traditional political party system and its corruption – using vulgar language and violent tones in order to foment the electorate's political and social anger and economic despair.

Other protests recalled, in a sense, some of the first demonstrations of dissent against Berlusconi and his way of conceiving politics and culture – the so-called *girotondi* (human chains)². These

² Originating in 2002 as a movement of civic resistance, 'girotondi' actually expressed first and foremost the widespread dissent of left-wing voters concerning the leaders of the centre-left coalition then named *Ulivo*. One of the recognized leaders of this movement was filmmaker Nanni Moretti who unexpectedly, after a political assembly of *Ulivo* in Piazza Navona, Rome, in February 2002, delivered an accusatory

included the two *No Berlusconi Days* (or *No B Days*), organized respectively in December 2009 and October 2010. Both took place simultaneously in Rome and other cities around the world. However, differently from *girotondi*, the two *No Berlusconi Days* lacked any specific political connotation, as they were organized by bloggers and Facebook users specifically to demand Berlusconi's resignation. Later the same organizers created a new Facebook page, *Il Popolo Viola*, to keep the protesters' community informed and united. This page is still open, and so is its reference website (<http://violapost.it/>), but it seems to have lost a coherent target for its criticism.

Moreover, February 2011 was the month of two other major protests in the aftermath of *Rubygate* – the last sex scandal to emerge in Berlusconi's career as Prime Minister – which detailed his embroilment with a 17-year-old Moroccan girl known as 'Ruby'. Intellectuals, activists, politicians, jurists, and trade unionists, together with members of civil society, gathered in Milan PalaSharp to ask, again, for Berlusconi's immediate resignation. In this way they responded to the appeal written in four languages by Gustavo Zagrebelsky, Paul Ginsborg and Sandra

speech against the centre-left politicians. Moretti criticized their lack of self-criticism with regard to their political choices of the previous years, for being unable or unwilling to prevent the violence of Berlusconi's political and media strategies – for example the *sycophantic* journalism of Emilio Fede allowing Berlusconi to win votes for the elections – for being too moderate in facing Berlusconi's policies and finally unable 'to talk to the head, soul and heart of people'. 'With this kind of political ruling class – shouted Moretti from the podium – we will never win' (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8kuVgaPZyts>)

Bonsanti on behalf of all members of the cultural association *Libertà e Giustizia*.³

Just one week later, on 13th February 2011, women also said 'basta!' with what was perceived as Berlusconi's repeated violations of women's dignity. Almost a million people marched across Rome and other world cities in a rally which took the name *Se Non Ora Quando?* (SNOQ, *If not now, when?*). This was opened by activist Lorella Zanardo, the writer of a short 2009 documentary titled *Il corpo delle donne* (*Women's bodies*),⁴ that has been watched online by more than five million viewers. This suggests that, collectively, protesters were now gaining greater awareness of issues surrounding representation of women in the media.

Zanardo's documentary investigated the reasons why Italian women were not publicly protesting against the surreal ways they were presented on TV, 'with bodies inflated to ridiculous proportions, like those of circus freaks', denying the representation of a more complex and at the same time genuine idea of femininity due to the obsessive repetitions of fake bodies, 'vulgar image(s) with silicone lips, thighs, breasts'. What's more, these kind of soft porn representations were broadcast throughout the day on very popular TV programs, and even by RAI channels, the national public television. Moreover, Zanardo's documentary, which later became a book and a project for teaching media education in schools, argued that portraying women in purely objectified terms simply 'goes along with men's every desire and gives up any possibility of being an equal "other" (...)

³ Freedom and Justice, <http://www.libertaegiustizia.it/chi-siamo/>

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t4njg1Mu0gw>

reduced or [self-reduced] to a sexual object fighting the passing of time'. Zanardo also highlighted the frequent tendency to use women as mute and decorative ciphers in many TV shows, forced to become caricatures of themselves. Even some successful professional women agreed, according to the accepted rubric, to be portrayed as objects of desire, deprived of their authenticity and thus made vulnerable. All this was typical of the Italian so-called *videocracy*, a regime in which Italy had arguably been lost for thirty years. This was a country where since the birth of 'televisione commerciale', 80 per cent of people had used television as their main, if not their only, information source. (See Gandini's documentary film *Videocracy*: 2009).

Finally, on October 15th 2011 the Occupy Movement reached Italian shores, with a few thousand people gathered in Rome to protest against the poor economic and employment conditions experienced particularly by the so-called 'precari/e della conoscenza': knowledge workers in the field of education, research and publishing.

Now, one may ask if all such insurgencies were just forms of 'street-fetishism'; namely direct actions 'organized at grass-roots level by activists' and 'supported in principle by opposition politicians as well as large portions of the public' (Bowman 2008: 81; 200), but actually not radically reconfiguring power dynamics and relations within the different institutions (particularly the government and the media). Or, conversely, one may ask if those manifestations were 'political performatives', that is 'actions and statements that anticipate something to come as participants begin to experience – as they begin to live – what

they are fighting for *while* they fight for it' (Arditi 2012: 4). Indeed, as Arditì states, 'democracy, like justice and hospitality, is always to come in the sense that all these will never cease to arrive (they have no final figure/destination) but already start to occur as we strive to make them happen' (4). In any case, the point is that although being often episodic and vanishing, street protests and insurgencies always leave a legacy and have 'a spectral afterlife that is anything but ethereal because it impregnates practices and institutions as much as ways of seeing and doing' (14). Particularly, in Arditì's view, the materiality of this afterlife is evident in many ways, not the least 'the cognitive shifts insurgencies generate' (14) and 'the cultural artifacts they leave behind' (15), such as photos, blogs, and websites, but also interviews, media analyses, conferences and publications, which try to give meaning to the events. Nevertheless, whatever the opinions on the protests are, it seems obvious that in recent years the demand for a more ethical form of politics and public life, was very urgent in Italy. And, to tell the truth, it still is. Suffice to say that the Italians have not yet exerted their right to vote since Berlusconi's resignation; nonetheless the country is undergoing several substantial reforms under Matteo Renzi's government, such as the school reformation named *La Buona Scuola* (*Good School*), provoking a huge teachers' national protest, but remaining largely unheard by the government.

This is the reason why politics and ethics are at the core of this issue of *JOMECS Journal*, devoted to Italian cultural studies, which we intend as an intellectual and activist practice pursuing the ethical-political commitment of cultural studies' original agenda. This practice aims at provoking debates,

possibly exerting leverage and making a difference in contemporary conjunctures and historical specificities, unmasking the connections and interactions between culture and power, within the different realms of social life: not just economy, but also race, class and gender issues. By virtue of this shared commitment, all the scholars invited to contribute to this issue have suggested their own readings and interpretations of a number of cultural matters in contemporary Italy, which some contributors have observed from within the country, living and working in Italy, and others from abroad, particularly Britain, Germany and the USA. They all have tried to question the current conditions and future possibilities of some of its institutions and ideological apparatuses: including the university, the media, and arts such as literature, cinema, design and photojournalism.

Pursuing the ethical commitment in today's socio-political arena (which still bears the effects of the 2007-2008 economic crisis), certainly involves deconstructing with a view to overcoming the hegemony of neoliberalism, as well as attempting to understand the constitutive role of culture within this hegemony. Contemporary capital has a cultural mission, argued Stuart Hall: this means that it operates through culture by making popular culture receptive to its messages (Hall and Mellino 2007: 26-27). For this reason, the challenges in the hands of intellectuals and of all those people who intend to subvert this current hegemony are many. As Stuart Hall, Doreen Massey and Michael Rustin contend in their framing statement to *After Neoliberalism? The Kilburn Manifesto*, this is 'a moment of potential rupture' (Stuart Hall et al. 2013: 8), a moment for calling into question the

neoliberal *common sense* or system of beliefs and assumptions based on the supposed naturalness of 'the market', the primacy of the competitive individual, and the superiority of the private over the public. This is the moment for 'changing the terms of debate, reformulating positions, taking the longer view, making a leap' (18) and envisioning new, radical alternatives for the future.

I think we may all agree with the urgent need to critique the pervasive 'vocabularies of the economy' (such as terms like 'customer', 'consumer', 'market', 'growth', 'debt', 'self interest'), which have shaped our neoliberal world view, our neoliberal conception of mutual relations with people and the world, and led to the denigration of everything connected with the adjective 'public', especially 'public worker' and 'public knowledge and education' (Massey 2013). For the contributors to *The Kilburn Manifesto*, at the basis of the reshaping of common sense there is the idea of a 'relational society', namely the assumption that individuals are not autonomous and independent, but strictly related, inter-dependent, and mutually in search of public solidarity. So empathy and cooperation between people, rather than individualism and competitiveness, should be the foundations of a new politics of relations. Reshaping common sense might also mean encouraging struggles for the complete respect and integration of ethnic and gender minorities, for the challenge to complex environmental issues, as well as fostering old and new feminist struggles – which seem to be even more unwinnable if gender and sexuality issues are mixed up with race and class ones, like those for political representations, reproductive rights, caregiving compensation and those against the gender wage gap and all

forms of violence. Reshaping common sense means basically to enhance humanism, but in order to see all these themes included in the political agenda of our governments, it would be necessary to advocate a radical process of education in cultural politics by means of public pedagogies. In this sense, a route I think it would be valuable to go through for current and future forms of Italian cultural studies is the one that moves fluently between theory and praxis, scholarship and activism, formal and non-formal educational contexts, a route which Stuart Hall, mostly inspired by Antonio Gramsci's thought, started to trace in Britain in the 1960s, assigning a new meaning to the word 'culture'. As Hall stated, indeed, *culture is a matter of becoming, and we are always in the process of cultural formation*.

When one comes to reasoning on what we might become, namely on our possible future identity or identities, educational contexts play a fundamental role. Not limited to schooling, academy and formal education, but also extended to all public spaces where identities are formed – including the different realms of popular culture – pedagogy can be read as 'a mode of cultural criticism that is essential for questioning the conditions under which knowledge is produced and subject positions are put into place, negotiated, taken up or refused' (Giroux 2000: 342). Thus pedagogy is strictly intertwined with culture and politics. As a matter of fact, pedagogy *is* a moral and political practice to be performed with the aim of connecting and articulating practices that are 'interdisciplinary, transgressive and oppositional' in challenging authority and power to 'broader projects designed to further racial, economic and political democracy, to strike a new balance and

expand what Stuart Hall and David Held have called the 'individual and social dimensions of citizens' rights' (354). For this reason some of the major tasks of educators and cultural workers are deconstructing cultural texts, unmasking underlying ideologies that reproduce and legitimise an unjust social order, and fostering ethical and political struggles able to promote personal and collective agency and social change, perhaps spreading the knowledge as much as possible by means of 'open education' tools (See Van Mourik Broekman, Hall et al. 2015).

These are obviously complex and intricate tasks, but discussing Italy while also trying to make sense of the future of Italian cultural studies on the pages of a foreign academic journal could be seen as a great opportunity to make visible the matters and the methods discussed.

The essays and the two book reviews that follow this editorial face several relevant questions for the Italian cultural (studies) debate: Patrizia Calefato's contribution opens the issue by investigating the possible abilities of cultural studies in Italy, the pedagogical and interventional practices which resist and those which need to be built in totally different forms in the age of neoliberal universities. Using a semiotic and fashion-theory perspective, in continuity with Calefato's essay, Antonella Giannone analyzes the construction of power via the body in the Italian political scene of the last two decades, making reference to the way pop, mass and media culture have been transforming our relation to power, as well as to the highly symbolic body of 'the chief'.

From the perspective of militant literary critique, but with a focus on a founding imperative of cultural studies, namely

ethical-political commitment, in his essay Raffaello Palumbo Mosca interprets the phenomenon of 'return to reality' in Italian fiction, as first and foremost a 'return to ethics'. Palumbo Mosca's analysis also aims at investigating the connection between novels and ethics in order to understand if and in what ways the novel is one of the conditions of possibility for moral thinking, or the thinking of morality. Ethics and social change are the concerns of Loredana La Fortuna's inquiry on Italian design, a study field which is particularly suitable to be studied from the critical perspective of cultural studies both for its hybrid, interdisciplinary nature, and for its earliest objective of changing society in a democratic way. La Fortuna's analysis shows what remains of the original political and ethical inclination of the renowned Italian Design of the Fifties and investigates whether this kind of design is still possible nowadays.

Cinema is at the centre of the ensuing essay: by employing the tools of textual analysis and journalistic sources, Enrica Picarelli inquires into what kind of cultural memory of contemporary Italy emerges from *The Great Beauty*, a film directed by Paolo Sorrentino, winner of the best foreign language film Oscar in 2014. In her article Picarelli uses Sorrentino's neo-baroque aesthetic register and filmic philosophy of civic engagement as frameworks to explore history in the making.

Flavia Laviosa's essay addresses the alarming phenomenon of femicide in Italy. After outlining the historical background of Italian legal reforms on the issues of domestic violence, stalking and femicide, starting from the 1931 Rocco Penal Code until the present day, Laviosa examines how RAI (the Italian

public broadcaster), since 2007, has been addressing the cultural and sociological factors causing these forms of violence against women in Italy.

The final section of the issue casts its gaze upon postcolonial Italy, namely the ambition of a geographical, cultural, political and critical territory aiming at 'conceiving of and practicing postcolonial studies from the borders of Europe, from its South, building links with other "borders" and tracing in this way a local and national commonality with European (post)colonialism' (Chambers 2014).⁵ The South, the Mediterranean Sea and the migrants' bodies are central themes in Italian postcolonial theoretical thought, thus in her essay Paola Zaccaria introduces her *Un-Walling the Mediterranean Sea* research project. Here Zaccaria also presents the theory of a Southern Critical Thinking and narrates the decolonizing pressures of trans-Mediterranean intellectuals, activists, artists, migrants and refugees who, by reclaiming freedom of mobility and disseminating (de)signs along the Mediterranean routes and walls, are inscribing a new aesthetics and politics able to shape a new consciousness. Moreover, in order to highlight how *artivism* can actually make a difference in the shaping of consciousness, the author makes reference to the grassroots independent cinema production entitled *Io sto con la Sposa* (*On the Bride's Side*, 2014), by Antonio Augugliaro, Gabriele del Grande and Khaled Soliman, defined as an urgent documentary and a political act of civil

⁵ My translation from Italian: 'pensare e praticare gli studi postcoloniali dai confini dell'Europa, dal suo sud, costruendo collegamenti con altri "confini", altri sud, tracciando in tal modo una comunanza locale e nazionale con il (post)colonialismo europeo'.

disobedience that sheds light on the experience of asylum seeking in Europe.

Finally, the issue ends with two relevant book reviews: Gaia Giuliani writes on the *Aut-aut* special section dedicated to 'The postcolonial and the revision of knowledge', an important contribution to the ongoing debate on postcolonial Italy and the consequences of a re-thinking of key epistemologies, identities and approaches within Italian academia from a postcolonial angle, while Serena Guarracino reviews an outstanding collection of essays entitled *Identità, migrazioni e postcolonialismo in Italia. A partire da Edward Said*, recently edited by Bruno Brunetti and Roberto Derobertis. By framing it in the wider debate on postcolonial or migrant writing in Italian, Guarracino means to assess how the volume starts from the legacy of

Edward Said's work to offer some precious insights on cultural criticism and the role of intellectuals in contemporary Italy, thus showing its topicality for contemporary cultural studies in Italy.

All of these contributions state and reiterate our idea of being on the side of the future, the future of cultural studies, but especially the future of our country and the world we live in.

I will always be immensely grateful to the editors of *JOMEK Journal* for accepting and welcoming this issue proposal, particularly to Paul Bowman for his great trust and support. I am also very grateful to all the contributors and peer reviewers for their hard work and kindness to me. I am truly honoured to have worked with them all.

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